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Head Start's role in addressing mental health in young children, their families, and educators

Head Start is a federal program founded on the principle that addressing childhood poverty and lifelong success requires a multi-generation approach, providing comprehensive services to vulnerable children and their families. Head Start provides high-quality early childhood education and comprehensive supports and services including health, mental health, nutrition, and family services and parent leadership. In Massachusetts, 28 Head Start programs served 11,225 young children and their families in the 2022-2023 program year.

Early Childhood Mental Health

Early childhood mental health describes a child's ability to express and control their emotions, build trustworthy connections, explore, and learn. Positive mental health requires skill that children learn throughout their first years. Reaching developmental and emotional milestones, learning positive social skills, and problem-solving techniques are all part of growing up mentally well. Children who are in good mental health have a high quality of life and function well across multiple settings. Sound mental health offers the essential foundation of stability that underpins all other facets of development, including the ability to overcome obstacles, build relationships, and succeed in education, the workplace, and the community.

Early childhood mental health is relational, and takes a comprehensive approach to support. Strong relationships provided through quality childcare and informed caregivers support early relationships and mental health, as does comprehensive education, stable housing, supported and healthy caregivers, and access to physical and mental health services. In order to thrive, young children need strong attachments with stable, responsive caregivers, such as parents and teachers. Consistent, responsive relationships with adults, and safe, stable environments strengthen children's ability to cope with trauma and develop resilience.

Unfortunately, many children have adverse experiences that negatively impact their mental health. Adverse Childhood Experiences, known as ACEs, have significant long-term impacts on children's mental health, physical health, and general well-being.¹ Examples of ACEs include persistent poverty, homelessness, foster care placement, living in threatening neighborhoods,

¹ *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)*. (n.d.). <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>



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food insecurity, poor childcare conditions, experiences of violence, abuse or neglect, poor parental mental health or substance abuse within their families.

Head Start’s mandate to serve the most vulnerable families, including those experiencing extreme poverty, homelessness, and children in foster care, ensures that it serves the children experiencing ACEs and the types of trauma that impact early childhood mental health. In addition, Head Start’s robust prioritization system further prioritizes families in the most vulnerable situations. Once enrolled, Head Start programs are required to limit the use of suspension and are prohibited from expelling children, as to not to exacerbate negative mental health.² This ensures that our most vulnerable children are provided with the consistent education and care we know is crucial.

It is by design that Head Start programs provide the protective factors that children need to cope with ACEs and develop resilience that will support their mental health. Comprehensive support and services is at the core of what Head Start does. All Head Start programs adopt social emotional curricula, overseeing both the classroom environment and providing strong foundations for educator interactions. Programs are required to provide educators with supports for effective classroom management and positive learning environments and provide them with strategies for supporting children with challenging behaviors and other social, emotional, and mental health concerns. Educators receive ongoing professional development on relational health and social-emotional curricula. They are trained to recognize and appropriately respond to trauma, social emotional challenges, and developmental differences.

Children in Head Start are also served by multi-disciplinary mental health teams made up of staff from both the Head Start program and Head Start community partners. Head Start programs employ mental health professionals such as disability services professionals, behavioral specialists, coaches, mentor teachers, mental health services professionals, and more. Many others on the Head Start team are also deeply involved in the relational work of early childhood mental health including educators, home visitors, and family advocates. Head Start programs build strong partnerships to support early childhood mental health, such as by securing mental health consultation services and working in partnership with public school districts and Early Intervention.

Head Start programs in Massachusetts do this critical mental health work every day with thousands of young children. In the 2022-2023 program year, programs served 1,074 young children experiencing homelessness and 339 children in foster care. 738 infants and toddlers (27%) in Head Start qualified for an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) due to a developmental delay, medical diagnosis or risk factors. 1,021 children (12%) served qualified for

² [Suspension and Expulsion: FAQs | ECLKC \(hhs.gov\)](#)



special education services and an Individual Education Plan, including 421 children with developmental delays.³

Children who have accessed the comprehensive mental health services provided by Head Start are less likely to repeat grades or require behavioral support later in school. They are 2.1% more likely to graduate high school, 8.7% more likely to attend college and 19% more likely to graduate college.⁴

Family mental health

The mental health needs of young children are best met through coordinated services that incorporate their full scope of relationships, environments, and individual needs. For a child to be mentally healthy, they must not be preoccupied with hunger, fear, or a lack of basic human necessities. Head Start supports families in identifying and reaching their goals related to finances and economic mobility, housing, and employment, among other needs. Head Start also works to connect families to the community and federal assistance they need while they work towards financial independence.

Head Start's multi-generational model places a strong emphasis on family well-being because we know that healthy families are better positioned to raise healthy children. Parents are engaged and supported with services not provided in traditional early childhood programs. Head Start Family and Community Partnership teams provide families with parenting support and strategies, as well as access to a strong social emotional curriculum and community resources. Opportunities for parents to become involved in their child's education abound, from volunteering in the classroom to sharing feedback with educators and participating in program governance through the Policy Council.

Flexible family resources are responsive to the needs of parents and families currently enrolled and the community in which the programs serve. Some family services offered include asset building services, English as a Second Language training, and education on preventative medical and oral health. Family services in direct support of mental health include mental health services, (accessed by 21% of families in the 2022-2023 program year), emergency/crisis intervention (accessed by 43% of families in the 2022-2023 program year), substance misuse prevention (accessed by 2% of families in the 2022-2023 program year), and substance misuse treatment (accessed by 2% of families in the 2022-2023 program year). Head Start programs also supported 177 families in acquiring housing during the 2022-2023 program year.⁵

³ [Program Information Report \(PIR\) | ECLKC \(hhs.gov\)](#)

⁴ [NHSA research compendium 2.0 2019.pdf](#)

⁵ [Program Information Report \(PIR\) | ECLKC \(hhs.gov\)](#)



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Early Educator mental health

Head Start programs support educators for the same reason they support parents: children need healthy, consistent caregivers. Educators and other staff are supported through staff wellness initiatives, certified mental health clinicians, employee assistance programs, comprehensive benefits, and mentoring. Staff also access high quality professional development and college level coursework provided at no cost to them. In addition to comprehensive benefits packages, many Head Start programs engage in reflective supervision, and supportive coaching and mentoring to aid in their practice and in their wellness and mental health.

Contact

Head Start programs provide mental health services to children, their families, and educators as part of Head Start's model of comprehensive services and supports. To learn more about all of Head Start's comprehensive services and the impacts across local communities, contact Massachusetts Head Start Association Executive Director Michelle Haimowitz at mhaimowitz@massheadstart.org to be connected to your local Head Start program.